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Old times live again for the Ramblers

By Elijah Wald
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Sometimes the cutting edge is honed on an old grindstone. In 1958, the New Lost City Ramblers became the leaders of an avant-garde by going back to the roots of American music. Immersing themselves in collections of scratchy old 78s, they produced a sound that was wild, raw and thrilling, utterly unlike the antiseptic cabaret approach that then dominated the folk scene.

The Ramblers broke with their urban predecessors by adopting not only the songs but the musical styles of the rural "folk." They believed that the old performers documented in the Library of Congress were not only repositories of vanishing folklore but also legitimate virtuosi, masters of unique and intricate vocal and instrumental styles. Forty years later this idea seems commonplace, but at the time it was revolutionary. When the Ramblers appeared, playing brilliantly on half a dozen instruments and singing with an earthy, backwoods energy, they created a new wave that is still rolling today.

"We were just trying to turn people on to all this great music," John Cohen says. "We considered it a privilege and a kick to do these things. It wasn't like we were trying to make a name for ourselves or get a hit. We were like Beat generation guys, digging the scene; it was 'look at this, experience this.' That's a great thing, it's wonderful, like a painter who didn't make paintings, but just did it with life."

> 'So many people came along who got started with us.'
> JOHN COHEN

From the earliest days, Cohen was the group's philosopher and provided its rhythmic pulse on guitar and banjo. Mike Seeger was group leader, if there was such a thing, and a multi-instrumental powerhouse on fiddle, autoharp, mandolin, harmonica and anything else that came to hand. The third place was originally taken by banjo and guitar master Tom Paley, followed in 1963 by Tracy Schwarz, a soulful ballad singer and fiddler whose Cajun stylings added yet another flavor to the group.

While the Ramblers never came near the pop charts (they described their albums as "long-playing, short-selling") they were a seminal influence on literally thousands of bands. "So many people came along who got started with us," Cohen says. "There's all these great musicians around now, and a lot of them are better than us, but we had an idea and we opened up the doors."

The Ramblers inspired listeners not only with their musical expertise but with an entertaining stage presence. They swapped instruments after every song, and covered their marathon bouts of tuning with humor that was equal parts hip and cornball. To them, the hokum was simply one more way of emulating the early commercial country bands, as were their trademark stage outfits of dark vests and ties.

The band's followers included not only old-time music revivalists, but also a new breed of folk-rockers who sought to blend the Ramblers' energy with an electric charge. Cohen recently formed an informal group called Uncle John's Old Time String Band, and says the joke is that the Grateful Dead's "Uncle John's Band" included two songs learned off Ramblers LPs. "We may do a tribute to the Grateful Dead and just do all our own songs," he jokes, adding that on Jerry Garcia's album with David Grisman eight of the 10 songs were from the Ramblers' repertoire.

Along with inspiring younger players, the Ramblers "rediscovered" and presented many of the legendary country musicians who had been their own inspirations. A new CD on the Vanguard label, recorded at the 1960s' Newport Folk Festivals, shows them backing such old-time luminaries as Maybelle Carter, Sam McGee and Roscoe Holcomb, and dozens of older musicians found a new audience requesting songs it had learned off Ramblers records.

The Ramblers more or less disbanded in the early 1970s, Seeger and Schwarz to branch out into solo careers and Cohen to teach visual arts and make a series of documentary films (he has just finished a book to go with his groundbreaking films of Peruvian huayno music). "We had made our point," Cohen says. "We always thought of what we did as transmitting repertoires and style, assuming that the audience was all gonna go home and play. It worked, and a lot of other people took it up where we left off. And we all had other interests we wanted to pursue."

Over the years, though, the Ramblers have continued to get together for occasional concerts and festivals. Cohen says that the rarity of their appearances, far from detracting from the performances, adds a certain excitement. "I always have the feeling of 'What's it gonna be like this time?'" he says. "We always try to bring some new things. But, you know, we made like 15 or 18 albums, so we have plenty of songs. And we all fall right back into it; for me, the only problem is getting those calluses back on my fingers."

The New Lost City Ramblers, at Johnny D's, Somerville, Sunday. Call 776-2004.

The New Lost City Ramblers: John Cohen, Mike Seeger and Tracy Schwarz.

Sonic Youth grows into bigger arenas

■ SONIC
Continued from Page 49

odd tunings, which was cool, and we'd denote 'em with slides or drumsticks underneath certain frets and create songs out of that. There was an interest in creating a completely new language within a rock 'n' roll format."

Does that seem presumptuous? "We didn't sit down and say, 'Let's create a completely new language,'" Moore says, "but we were aware of it and knew it was totally unlike anything else that was happening in our little world."

And that world was little then. The founding members of Sonic Youth – Moore, guitarist Lee Ranaldo and bassist/guitarist Kim Gordon – were not interested in pursuing the melodic, jangly end of post-punk music. Their music was often harsh, gnashing.

Says drummer Steve Shelley, who joined the band full time in 1985: "It's natural to us, because we've been immersed in it so long. And all the things that we collected as our musical heritage before we started Sonic Youth – Gang of Four, the Birthday Party, Can, the Stooges."

Moore harkens back to the early-'70s rock criticism of Lester Bangs, R. Meltzer and Patti Smith (whom he recently joined in a Cambridge performance) because "their description of rock 'n' roll was really relative to the vibe of the music; it wasn't cold, it was heated."

When Smith started playing her street-smart, poetic rock 'n' roll in 1974, the teen-aged, small-town Connecticut boy Moore responded. "She was responsible for introducing me to, for lack of a better word, this punk-rock aesthetic."

Moore and Ranaldo, who both played with Glenn Branca's wall-of-noise guitar ensembles, formed Sonic Youth with Gordon, and the "attitude that we're all open to the idea that anything can happen. There's no real stylistic definition for the band. We didn't have much of a focus. We were coming out of these weird, disparate backgrounds – art school, getting involved with these downtown no-wave people. It was a good chemistry."

They may have been a difficult study for the uninitiated, but Moore says they never intended to be elitist or off-putting – certainly they were more accessible than their peer John Zorn. "He was very confrontational, whereas we were, I guess, much more friendly," says Moore. "Everybody was more than welcome to take part in what we were doing."

PHOTO / MICHAEL LAVINE

Sonic Youth (from left, Moore, Gordon, Shelley and Ranaldo) will play the Orpheum Sunday and, according to Moore, "hope it translates."

The band moved through a who's who of independent labels – SST, Homestead, Blast First – before it signed with Geffen's DGC in 1990. It gained respect, but distribution of its records was spotty; royalty checks, spottier still. (Many of those albums were reissued on CD this year by DGC.)

Moore and Ranaldo meshed perfectly as a guitar duo, the Allman Brothers Band of their generation, if you will, but with lead and rhythm roles blurred. "Lee has much more dexterity," says Moore. "I'm a bit of a clumsy player. Lee might bring a more classicist playing to the group, whereas I bring a primitive quality. We tend to get involved with the two guitars creating one kind of thing – the third mind."

Moore, Ranaldo and Gordon (Moore's wife) all write. How much do the lyrics matter and how different are the writers' viewpoints? "Lyrics are very important," says Moore. "But we're more into the lyrics working musically – this is something that gets more refined the more you get involved with it. We all have three completely different approaches. Lee's are more storytelling – he's very influenced by Beat culture; Kim's are more conversational, which I find interesting; and mine are just sort of bad teen-age bedroom poetry."

Gordon also brings a tough, take-no-prisoners, feminist angle to the band. "Kim's lyrics definitely have an underlying feminist viewpoint," says Moore, "but I don't think she's trying to enforce feminism. It's just where she comes from, being true to herself, not proselytizing."

With "Washing Machine," its 12th full-length effort, Sonic Youth has made an album that is challenging, but might be perceived as somewhat easier on the ears. Moore laughs. "I guess," he says. "If it came out in '84 I don't know if anyone would say that. I thought it was a harsher, weirder record than we've made in a while."

It features "The Diamond Sea," a 19-minute opus that's been edited to a shorter single for radio. It's a subtle, quietly breathtaking guitar extravaganza, and was the starry-sky climax of Lollapalooza. "It's a pretty cool song," says Moore. "For me, it's a very simple song, proof that simplicity is as effective as complexity."

What about hits? Does Sonic Youth have any? Not really, but you might recall "Teenage Riot," "Dirty Boots" and "Kool Thing," an MTV alt-rock staple.

"We never play 'Kool Thing,'" says Moore, about the live shows. "It's too MTV-conscious. I think MTV is a . . . drag. I'm afraid of playing that song because then they'll think about the video; then they'll think of MTV; and then I'll feel like a schmo. I don't want to be part of that lineage."

Any late-in-the-game regrets about choosing the moniker Sonic Youth? The band members are, you know, not kids anymore. "Oh, Sonic Youth," says Moore, with a laugh. "I don't know who said it, but: 'Youth is totally wasted on the young.'"

Parting shot, from Moore, whose band rides a roller coaster every night: "Never trust a band who's good every night."

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